Rural Internal Migrants Navigating Apprenticeships and Vocational Training: Insights from Cambodia and Laos

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ABSTRACT

The policy phrase *Technical and Vocational Education and Training* (TVET) is rapidly gaining ground across Southeast Asia (and beyond). TVET is centrally about 'skills' development and considered an important policy component in smoothening young people's 'school-to-work transition'. It is seen as increasing young people's employability and earning capacity thus contributing to alleviating important youth-related social problems such as youth unemployment, intergenerational transmission of poverty, and the mismatch between schooling and the labour market.

Despite the numerous reports written about TVET, little is known about how vocational training and education works as a field of practice, how young people negotiate it, and how it is part of being young whilst simultaneous aspirational and future-oriented. This is especially true for informal training and apprenticeships, yet; these are most ubiquitous.

Combining analysis of policy documents with ethnographic material obtained from Cambodia and Laos, this paper goes some way to fill these voids. The empirical focus is on migrant youth in their teens and early twenties who have either left the countryside for 'apprenticeships' in urban areas (Laos and Cambodia) or who have entered 'apprenticeships' and/or training at subsequent points in their (internal) migratory projects (Cambodia).

Based on the above, we make three principal points. First, policy discussions on TVET remain frequently limited to formal institutional spaces, with little attention to the ubiquitous, highly dynamic, private forms of training and apprenticing that most young migrants themselves seek out. Unlike the formal institutional spaces (modeled on modern forms of schooling), informal training practices provide important additional 'skills' seldom acquired in formal spaces. Second, our data show that young people's entry into apprenticeships and vocational training seldom follows linear pathways. Instead, entry into particular forms of training is shaped by kin relations and young people's own social networks and we find that young people mostly diverge from the imagined 'education'- 'training'- 'work' sequence. Third, whilst a gender perspective is adopted throughout, this offers most striking insights in relation to young people's aspirations connected with their training and apprenticeships. Young people of both genders aspire to becoming self-employed, yet for distinctly gendered reasons.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper we pull together qualitative research with young migrants from rural Cambodia and rural Laos who left the countryside for urban apprenticeship and training positions. These concern mostly informally organized placements outside of the formal education system that are the focus of most policy discussions on Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). There are no figures available on the number of

young people who obtain skill training through such informally organized placements but we would suggest that this probably exceeds the small (and known) number of students in formal TVET placements by far.

The material we present in this paper is qualitative and based on a fairly small number of cases. The Lao material stems from research conducted in one predominantly ethnic Lao village in central Laos where research was conducted by the second author between 2007-2009. The Cambodian research was conducted in July 2013 in Phnom Penh by the first author. Put together this material gives an impression of how vocational training features in young villagers' migration projects as they are leaving the village and how it may subsequently enter their migration projects whilst already in an urban area.

SITUATING VOCATIONAL TRAINING AND EDUCATION IN CAMBODIA AND LAOS

Increased attention to Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is not limited to Cambodia and Laos. It is a global phenomenon envisioned contributing to alleviating a range of global problems ranging from youth unemployment and poverty to political instability.

The global drive of expanding TVET can be illustrated by the establishment of an International Centre for Technical and Vocational Training and Education by UNESCO in 1999 (called UNESCO-UNEVOC). One of the flagship programmes of this Centre is further illustrative of the global drive towards expanding TVET: a UNEVOC network envisioned linking TVET institutions in UNESCO Member States the world over with the explicit aim of promoting TVET systems and policies, and sharing of TVET related knowledge and experience.[1]

Within UNESCO's overarching objectives of realizing Education for All and Lifelong Learning, TVET is presented as 'central to reducing poverty and significantly increase the likelihood of finding decent work or of generating income through self-employment…investment in TVET is therefore an instrument to accelerate and sustain economic' (UNESCO, 2009: 1). This rhetoric also accompanies TVET policy discussions in Cambodia and Laos (UNESCO, 2013: 1; Boupha, n.d.). However, the enthusiasm with which TVET appears to be embraced by the Cambodian and Lao governments cannot be reduced to such global discourses. We argue that an increased attention for TVET in Cambodia and Laos also needs to be understood in relation to their particular historical and socio-economic circumstances.

First, TVET is embraced to facilitate the agrarian transition away from low-technology small-holder farming towards a more diverse and higher value economy. Cambodia and Laos are largely rural and agrarian societies. United Nations estimates an urbanization rate of nearly 20% in Cambodia in 2010 and 33% in Laos.[2] In addition, the agricultural sector continues to employ the largest share of the labour force, respectively 51% in Cambodia (2012 data) [3] and 77% in Laos (2005 data (Bounthavy Sisouphanthong and Myers, 2006: 70)). A significant share of the population (19% in Cambodia (2008) and 34% in Laos (2009) survives on less than 1.25US$ per day (the international threshold for measuring absolute poverty) and both countries have fairly lowly educated and young populations. At the same time, Cambodia and Laos are located in one of the world's most dynamic regional economies and both the Cambodian and Lao governments view regional economic integration and attracting foreign investment as key towards graduating from the United Nations' category of least developed countries (Bounthavy Sisouphanthong and Myers, 2006; MoP and UNDP, 2007). These policy objectives are envisioned to generate employment opportunities for the rural poor, and rural youth especially, beyond small-holder agriculture. Expanding TVET, in this light, is considered important for matching the supply side of the equation (Bounthavy Sisouphanthong and Myers, 2006: vii, 54; MoP and UNDP, 2007: 99-100).

[1] For details see: http://www.unevoc.unesco.org/go.php (accessed 20 March, 2014).

[2] http://esa.un.org/unup/CD-ROM/Urban-Rural-Population.htm (accessed 18 March, 2014).

[3] Source: World Bank country data available here: http://data.worldbank.org/country/ (accessed, 17 March 2014).

Second, TVET is also embraced to address an educational reality in which primary education is quickly becoming a near universal experience for Cambodian and Lao children (see Table 1), yet many of these children don't enter secondary education, let alone finishing it, and are considered lacking starting qualifications for the non-farm jobs many of them aspire to:

> In the years to come, more than 200,000 young persons in rural communities are likely to become literate or educated annually, and most will look for employment options outside agriculture. Being literate or having a primary school certificate, however, may not qualify them for remunerative non-farm jobs; some technical training is required (MoP and UNDP, 2007: 99)

Table 1: Poverty Headcount and Educational Enrolment Data in Cambodia, Laos and Thailand[4]

	Cambodia	Laos	Thailand
Poverty headcount (1.25$ p.d.)	19% (2008)	34% (2009)	0.4% (2010)
Net enrolment rate primary (2008)	98.2	85.2	94.6
Net enrolment rate secondary (2008)	38.2	35.3	74.3
Technical/vocational enrolment in secondary (ISCED 2 and 3) as % of total secondary enrolment (ISCED 2 and 3)	2.3	0.6	16.4
Gross enrolment ratio. Tertiary (ISCED 5 and 6). Total	9.1	13.1	47.7

WHAT IS TVET?

TVET as a policy field is difficult to pin down as it includes formally institutionalized types of education and training as well as highly informal practices. The definition of TVET presented by the Cambodian National Training Board, which is mandated with developing the field in Cambodia, reflects this. It defines TVET as

> the process of mastering the skills, attitudes and knowledge required to gain employment or self employment and then to maintain that employment over a career and a working lifetime. The TVET system allows young people to start in basic jobs such as bricklaying or kitchen helper and then, through going to a TVET institutions part time, to move up the career ladder until they reach senior management in construction or hospitality or leadership jobs in technology and business (National Training Board)

Despite such acknowledgements of the informal dimension of TVET, policy discussions are typically situated in and limited to the formally institutionalized part of TVET (see: MoE, 2007; UNESCO, 2013). This is illustrated for example, by diagrams of national education systems which firmly place TVET within the formal education system even though only a fraction of those in formal education are in TVET (see Table 1). On the other hand, there is a long history and ongoing thriving practice of informally organized education and training in both Cambodia and Laos. Next, a strong policy commitment to expanding the formally institutionalized part of TVET

[4] Data sources: Poverty data from World Bank World Development Indicators; educational data from UNICEF 'at a glance' country profiles.

is also at odds with the relatively high costs per students for this type of education and the apparent lack of interest among young people to enter TVET as the final segment of their formal schooling (Boupha, n.d.: 5-6).[5] The above definition by the Cambodian National Training Board would also include forms of work that young people enter with the dual aim of training and earning a living. In much of rural Cambodia and Laos poor households do not have the means to sustain their children's education or training even if this were to be free of charge. In such conditions migrating for extra local work is often the most realistic approach to learning a skill that cannot be obtained through everyday work in the village. For example, Palivan's father justified his daughter's migration from rural Laos to central Thailand to work in a garment workshop at the age of 15 or 16 as a realistic avenue for acquiring the skill of tailoring whilst simultaneously earning towards purchasing her own sewing machine and setting up an independent business (Palivan had quit school after primary 4) (Huijsmans, 2010: 286).

However, in the remainder of the paper we limit ourselves to those arrangements that are understood by the young people themselves as training – which means they don't get money for it but often have to pay a fee to take part in it. In addition, we focus on the private and mostly informal part of the TVET field that falls outside conventional educational structures. This includes kin-based apprenticeship arrangements, non-kin apprenticeship arrangements as well as classroom based training in private training institutions.

In the Lao village in which the second author conducted research only few young villagers migrated solely with the purpose of obtaining informal vocational training. Those that did were all girls who aspired towards running a 'beauty shop' from their rural homes.[6] This is partly because in Laos apprenticeship positions are fairly prominent in beauty shops whereas in many other sectors young people simply emerged in the job and learnt as they went.[7] One such case is Ketmanee, she is the sixth born child of a land-holding family. After completing secondary education in the village she moved at age 19 or 20 to relatives in Vientiane who arranged for her a 4 ½ month apprenticeship arrangement at Vientiane based beauty-shop. For her, an important motivation for getting training in Vientiane was to get acquainted with the latest fashion and introduce this to her rural customers in the beauty shop she has set up upon return in her older sister's noodle shop in *Baan Naam*.

ENTERING INFORMAL TVET ARRANGEMENTS

Ketmanee's account from rural Laos underscores the importance of networks in accessing extra-local opportunities for young rural folk, whether this concerns migrant work or migrant education. These networks are often kin-based and part of the young migrants parents' social networks (Huijsmans, 2012). Once young rural migrants are in the urban settings the variety of training arrangements they enter into appear larger as is suggested by research by the first author in Phnom Penh which is discussed in more detail in the next section.

Research by the first author in Phnom Penh, Cambodia shows that despite the variation in form of vocational training virtually all training comes with a fee (see Table 2). This includes some kin-based apprenticeship placements. Yet, it appears that, on the whole, classroom based training is most costly followed by

[5] Similar observations emerge from Vietnam. An English national daily reports: 'facing a severe student shortage, many vocational training school classrooms equipped with expensive tools and machinery are going unused as enrolment remains stagnant' (Vietnam News, 2014).

[6] Here we are excluding from the analysis the long-standing custom of boys and young men migrating to become a novice monk. In many ways this may be considered a form of apprenticeship yet the difference is that the practice is not understood in terms of individual mobility within the world of work but in terms of inter-generational (and gendered) transfer of merit (Keyes, 1986).

[7] This includes restaurant work, construction work, and agricultural work. Garment factories would typically organize some very short and rudimentary form of training for new employees.

apprenticeship placements with non-kin. The expense of obtaining vocational training and education outside the formal educational structure means for many poor rural youth that they simply cannot enter such training directly following their formal education. This explains, in part, an empirical reality in which the actual trajectories of many young rural migrants in and out of apprenticeships and training hardly conform to transition pathways envisioned by policy makers. This leads us to study how young people navigate the complex field of urban private and informal apprenticeships and training.

Table 2: Young Rural Migrants in Different Forms of Training in Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Alias/sex/age	Type of training	Fee[8] and 'benefits'
Kin based apprenticeship placement		
Dany/F/21	Beautician	No charge
Tim/M/17	Motorbike repair	100 USD (incl. acc. and food)
Non-kin apprenticeship placement		
Phal/M/21	Tailoring (male)	250 USD (incl. acc. and food)
Makara/M/22	Phone repair	350 USD[9] (incl. acc. but he stayed at his workplace)
Panha/M/21	Air-condition repair	350 USD (incl. acc. and food)
Private classroom based training		
Deth/F/26	Tailoring and dressmaking	200 USD (incl. acc.)
Touch/F/23	Dressmaking	500 USD (incl. acc. but she stayed with her sibling)
Sokun/F/23	Dressmaking	650 USD (training fee) + 250 USD to be paid for acc. and food
Channa/F/23	Beautician	950 USD[10] + cosmetics kit of 150 USD (no acc. and food)

NAVIGATING THE URBAN LANDSCAPE OF VOCATIONAL TRAINING: MOVING IN, OUT, THROUGH

The urban research conducted by the first author in Phnom Penh, Cambodia in July 2013 sheds more light on the various ways in which vocational training and apprenticing feature in young people's life trajectories. Whereas the policy discourse suggests that young people enter vocational training after their academic schooling and then move into the world of work such a school-migration-VT trajectory was only observed among two of the nine young people studied. Of the other seven, three had already done vocational training in the province before migrating for further training in Phnom Penh and four first worked in Phnom Penh before entering vocational training.

[8] Note that the fee did in most cases not make the training time-bound.

[9] Bargained down from 500 USD.

[10] Bargained down from 1900USD.

Table 3: Young Rural Migrants and their Life Trajectories Patterns

Trajectories patterns	Highest educational attainment/age	Vocational training/age		Waged employment in Phnom Penh/age
		Phnom Penh	Province	
School-migration-VT				
Dany (F)	Grade 7th/14	1st/19		
Panha (M)	Grade 12th/18 (completed)	1st/21		
School-VT-migration-VT				
Touch (F)	Grade 8th/15	3rd/23; 1st/15	2nd (Kratie)/22	
Sokun (F)	Grade 12th/18 (completed)	2nd/23	1st (Kompong Speu)/14	
Tim (M)	Grade 7th/14	2nd/17	1st (Kompong Cham)/16	
School-migration-work-VT				
Channa (F)	Grade 12th/18 (semester 1)	1st/23		Mart/19
Makara (M)	Grade 11th/17	1st/22		Construction/17
Deth (F)	Grade 7th/13	1st/26		Garment factory/16
Phal (M)	Grade 6th/14	1st/21		Security company/16

Table 3 shows that the three trajectories observed do not bear much relation with young people's educational attainment, gender or other individual characteristics. Instead, young people's socio-economic background and their position in the household hold some more explaining power. Makara, for example, is the first-born son of a poor, landless family in Kompong Thom province. Makara quit school at grade 11th because his family was in strong need of financial support and he was 'big' enough to contribute to this end. Makara left for construction work in Phnom Penh at the age of 17 in 2008 and only entered vocational training some time later. Dany and Sokun both come from relatively better-off households and are both first-born daughters. In their case, it was their families who financially supported their training in Phnom Penh. Dany migrated to Phnom Penh for beautician apprenticeship when she was 18 or 19 years old after quitting grade 7th in Prey Veng province for sometimes. Sokun had her first dressmaking apprenticeship when she was 14 years old although she was still continuing grade 8th in Kompong Speu province. Although Dany first entered VT in Phnom Penh and Sokun started her VT in the province, in both cases their entry into VT was shaped by their family background. Both of them were socialized since young into the skilled vocation of their female relatives who provided apprenticeship in beautician work (Dany) and dressmaking (Sokun). This kin-based training arrangement is based on the moral obligation (female) senior kin to provide guidance to (female) junior kin while the junior provides labour for free or little money. In this arrangement, the junior learns the skill by doing the service for clients at the actual business space.

Absence of such kinship network led Makara to search for a training placement himself. In addition, Sokun also had to look for her second training (in Phnom Penh) herself. In looking for appropriate placements gender appeared playing an important role. As a young woman, Sokun was keen to find a place that provided in-house accommodation although it is the most expensive arrangement. That way she can convince her mother of her solo migration due to parental fear of what the city can negatively do to their young single daughter. Sokun enrolls when she was 21 years old in classroom based training at a Phnom Penh based private dressmaking shop which guards against 'improper' practices of young girls (i.e. hanging out late, going out without information of whereabouts, etc.). Training is conducted in classroom style by a female trainer along with other (female) trainees in a separate space from the actual business (see Table 4).

What concerns a young man like Makara most in choosing 'right' training placement is not provision of accommodation (and institutional discipline) but the fee and quality of training that is provided. Because he has to remit some money back home (based on him being the first-born son) he can only save enough to pay half of the training fee for the commencing month. He went from one phone repair shop to another at a local market near his workplace in searching for an apprenticeship arrangement. Although he knew there was a well-known training center providing phone repair skill, he chose not to go after checking with those who used to learn there because he feared that he could not be skillful from learning only 'theory' most of the time. He found the second shop offering a timeless apprenticeship in phone repair through negotiation of fee and payment. This form of training is coined in the study as non-kin based apprenticeship because it is provided by an unrelated adult but it is learning by doing at actual business space under mentorship of 'teacher' or trainer (see Table 4).

Table 4: Typology of Informal Training in Phnom Penh

Typology of vocational skill transfer/criteria	**Kin based apprenticeship**	**Non kin based apprenticeship**	**Private classroom based training**
Mode of recruitment	Kinship network	Social or own network with background 'checked'	Clientele network
Logic of recruitment	Moral obligation Free or little money	Financial motivation Fee and cheap labor	Financial motivation High fee and reserved labor
Setting	Shared physical space between business and apprenticeship	Shared physical space between business and apprenticeship	Separate spaces between business and training
Curriculum	Implicit (learning by doing)	Implicit (learning by doing) and explicit (mentoring)	Explicit (instructing practice on assigned task)

As mentioned in Table 4, kin and non-kin based apprenticeship offers much more than the technical 'skill' that is offered in classroom based forms of training. Because the training is held at the same space with business and household site, Makara was exposed to both business dealing and family intimacy, hence acquired additional 'skills' and experiences. Discussions with Makara about how he valued his placement show the importance of such embedding in real-life context. He mentioned that he learnt to deal with impatient and unfriendly, referred by him as 'rude', clients by observing how his mentor dealt with it. He elaborates that,

> A way of doing business is that if a client is quite rude, we cannot act the same. We can just fix the price of, say, a phone without discount. Buy or not it's up to him. He [teacher] only told this much but we can develop [the tactic] further by ourselves... Being able to sell or not is not a big deal. Phone can never be spoiled unsold. (Conversation on August 4, 2013)

In addition, on a daily basis Makara was exposed to communications and relationship between his teacher's family members and perceived this as inspiring aspects of a successful life. He said, 'When teacher is tired of teaching or repairing phone he looks at his baby, holds him tight and kisses him for a while. That is so motivating. If I can have such a lovely kid and warm family along with career, I would be the happiest man. I long for the same thing in the future.' (Conversation on August 1, 2013).

In all cases studied, in both Cambodia and Laos young people took up vocational training with the aspiration of setting up their own, independent business. However, whilst young women and men appear to share this aspiration there are nonetheless important gender differences underpinning them. Makara entered his vocational training in phone repair out of frustration with his construction work. He believed that becoming trained in phone repair would transform him from a manual worker to a 'knowledge based professional' who possesses higher status in both economic and social terms. Through this skilled vocation he aspires to have his own career that is stationery, not moving from one construction project to another. He aspires becoming in his own control and self-sufficient, not depending on whether his boss wins project bidding. According to Makara this is an important base for his ideal of family happiness, in which he as a man as a husband and a grow-up son, is financially stable and responsible for well-being of his own family and his parents. Becoming a male breadwinner is an image of a socially accepted man that he aspires.

Although wanting to be self-sufficient, self-control through skilled self-employment, young female migrants' aspiration to become someone has contrasting meaning from that of male migrants. Sokun aspires to become financially independent of her prospective husband, but in such a way that it doesn't challenge dominant gender norm of women as a stay-at-home daughter, wife and mother. She said, 'Either beautician or dressmaking is a good personal career for us. As women, we cannot jump too high. Also it is based at home. We can open it at home and it is convenient than hiring a place elsewhere.' (Conversation on August 1, 2013) What is remarkable in Sokun's quotes above is that she saw such female-dominant skill as 'proper' skill for young single women like themselves. Also she saw close tie between possessing vocational skill like beautician and dressmaking and becoming self-employed at 'home'. Home to these young migrants is where their immediate kin— parents reside. Because she was supported financially for the training and living expense in Phnom Penh, it was Sokun's obligation to return 'debt' and 'good deed' as a socially accepted woman and daughter to her widow mother by going back home set up business and at the same she can provide for her mother emotional support.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have aimed to provide some qualitative richness to increasing attention to TVET as a field of policy and practice. In our paper we have focused on informally organized placements where young people hope to obtain a skill. This is very much part of what is generally understood as the TVET field, yet, most policy discussions nonetheless focus on the formally organized part of the field that is typically embedded in the formal education system.

We would suggest that this formal part of TVET remains in places like Cambodia and Laos a minority experience. For most rural youth getting into formal TVET places is very hard and for those who do get in there it is often the only educational pathway open to them. By focusing on informal placements we hope to have shed light on how young people actually go about obtaining some training, how this is shaped by where they come from, as well as by their future aspirations and how all this is deeply gendered.

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